The Finns Arrive

By AARON HARDY ULM

FINLAND has been a country for about fifteen hundred years. It has been a nation for more than five hundred years. Yet its first diplomatic representative in America reached Washington only a little more than a year ago. Though Finland is an old nation and, save during intervals of outside interference, has been self-governing for centuries, it only recently came into control of its foreign affairs.

Its first and present envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to the United States is Armas Herman Saastamoinen, whose personality is attractive, one might say, in ratio to the length and difficulty of his name.

He is the youngest member of first rank in the Washington diplomatic corps, being only 34 years old, and he is a great admirer of this country. He spent a year here studying our life and conditions long before he had any thought that he would some day represent his own country here. He has also lived much in England, speaks excellent English and is thoroughly familiar with all phases of the Anglo-Saxon idea. Madame Saastamoinen was reared and educated in this country, but is a Finn. They were married in America.

Minister Saastamoinen claims no profession except business, in which he has been one of his country's leaders. Most of his business experience has been in the lumber and allied industries, wherein his concerns conduct vast operations. He has also had much experience in politics. When Finland took on full nationality he became a national leader. When a diplomatic corps was organized he became minister to Denmark and was later transferred from Copenhagen to Washington.

"We have had to organize a diplomatic corps out of raw material," said Judge E. Ilves, counselor and at the time in charge of the Finnish Legation in Washington, the minister being on a visit to Finland. "When we took over control of our foreign affairs we had virtually no men who had experience in international diplomacy, for during more than a century Finland was a possession of the Russian crown. Prior to that it was a part of Sweden. None of my people had experience in the Russian diplomatic service.

"But we had little difficulty in organizing a corps of capable diplomats. It is made up largely, if not dominated, by business men of the type of Mr. Saastamoinen."

Judge Ilves could speak thus without embarrassment as he happens to be a lawyer by profession.

Those who as school children have marveled over the little, secluded and isolated spot called Finland in the almost extreme northern part of Europe, will be inclined to wonder how the country it represents was able suddenly to send good diplomatic representatives to all parts of the world.

The chief reason is that Finland's very isolation, which, however, is more apparent than real, tended to create a fair supply of the type of citizens who, without diplomatic experience, could go forth and set up legations of highly efficient kind; for Finland has been compelled to carry on extensive commercial operations with other countries. Though rich in resources, the country's extreme northerly situation does not make for variety of products. Hence the quantity of most things they have go far beyond their own needs, while there are many very important things they don't possess at all.

For example, their forest resources are almost unlimited, though of coal they have none, and but few other minerals and even those are not plentiful.

The summers are too short for good wheat production; hence their cereal crop consists chiefly of rye.

They have developed a large manufacturing industry, but they have to import much in the way of machinery and clothing products.

A necessary foreign trade has evolved for the country of seeming remoteness a class of highly traveled and informed business men, who are particularly apt in the dominating commercial phase of modern international politics.

Thus the Finnish Legation in Washington has no commercial attaché, or business diplomatist, as is now associated with nearly all the legations and embassies of other countries, our own included.

"The reason is a simple one," a person who is informed on the subject advised the writer. "The old type of diplomatist that still heads most of the diplomatic establishments of the older countries is at best a political and not a commercial expert. In fact, he is inclined to scorn the affairs of crass trade. Hence he must have among his subordinates skilled men of trade, who are becoming the real ambassadors and ministers; for commerce, and not politics of the old sort, now sounds the dominating note of international affairs.

"Therefore, Finland is beginning right by having men of business as the real chiefs of its diplomatic establishments abroad."

There is perhaps another reason why the Finns could choose out of their population of not much more than 3,500,000, men who could capably look after their affairs in countries of many different languages and varying manners. The cause again has roots in isolation, for those people of the Far North are isolated more in a linguistic than they are in a geographical sense.

Outside Finland it would probably be difficult to find in all the world as many as 1,000 non-Finnish persons who are masters of that country's chief language. That language has little kinship with the well-known tongues of the world. It has no Aryan base, as has the Teutonic, the Latin, the Slavic and the Anglo-Saxon tongues. It originated somewhere in Northern Asia, probably Siberia. It is related, as are the peoples, to the languages of the Esthonians, the Magyars of Hungary, and, though not so much, to those of the Bulgars and the Turks.

For the Finns, like the other peoples mentioned, came out of that mysterious North from which the Tartars sprang. Hence they differ in origin from the bulk of Europeans. And though they have been Europeans since the sixth or seventh century of the Christian Era they still have characteristics, as in that of language, which set them apart from the big European races.

Because their own language is not used outside Finland and not exclusively in Finland, the Finns have had to pay much attention to other languages. In fact they are a bilingual people, for the Swedish tongue has equal standing with the Finnish. Both are used officially and in commercial intercourse. Swedes make up about 12 per cent of the population of Finland and, though they have been there for centuries, they cling to their own language as the Finns do to their own.

HON. ARMAS HERMAN SAASTAMOINEN

Minister from Finland and the youngest member of first rank in the Washington diplomatic corps.

MADAME SAASTAMOINEN

But the Finn who desires to travel or to have wide survey of the world's literature or even to direct more than local business operations must know languages other than the two that rank equally in Finland. Hence the study of foreign languages is prominent in even the secondary schools, where many pupils learn to read and speak German, Russian and French. English is an elective course in the high schools and the country's two universities and is mastered by many.

Therefore, a traveler from almost any part of Europe or America will find in Finland many persons who can converse with him, no matter how linguistically limited he may be.

The Finnish language is very difficult and few outsiders learn it.

It is a sonorous tongue, having a musical facility likened to Italian, and claims a literature of consequence. As long as two centuries ago the Finns were among if not the most literary of European peoples. This is because they were perhaps the first of Europeans to adopt popular education. It began with a system of home teaching directed by the clergy that is still partly in vogue. The public school there is comparatively modern. It is now quite extensive. Compulsory education doesn't exist there as in most countries of Western Europe and because of universal school attendance they claim a compulsory system is unnecessary. Less than one per cent of the adult population is unable to read and write.

Country children are not admitted to the public schools until they are nine years old, though city children may begin at seven.

A preponderance of Finland's population is rural. Until within the last few decades agriculture was almost the country's exclusive industry. Now they have cities, with industrial populations that operate large manufacturing enterprises. Paper is their chief article of manufacture, for they have vast supplies of timber suitable for wood pulp. They have many cotton mills that consume American cotton. Normally they export textiles.

We've lately been importing wood pulp from Finland and supplies from that land may help relieve the paper shortage that is now handicapping the publishing business throughout America.

Finland's timber resources are extraordinary and are now the country's chief medium of export trade. They send much lumber to England, Denmark, Belgium and France.

The country's trade with America is growing. Since the war a shipping service between the two countries has been established. They have been looking to us for much of their foodstuffs and are buying American machinery. We have also been sending them coal. Our chief import from Finland at present is wood pulp.

Prior to the war Finland did a big export business in dairy products, largely with the British Isles. It, like Denmark, is normally a great country for milk and butter. The farmers have established hundreds of co-operative dairies. In fact, co-operative enterprise prevails there as perhaps nowhere else in Northern Europe.

They have co-operative stores, co-operative banks and insurance companies and telephone companies. Next to Sweden there are said to be more telephones per capita in Finland than in any other country, America not excepted. There is scarcely a Finnish home without that aid to communication.

One might think the prevalence of telephones to be due to the apparent difficulties in the way of personal contact in much of Finland. During about one-half the year, the land is covered with snow and ice. The topography of the country is seried with waterways of all kinds. It has been called the land of the thousand lakes.

"It would be more accurate to call it the land of one hundred thousand lakes," some one has said. Lakes and lagoons are everywhere.

But they and the streams they feed or are fed by really facilitate inter-communication, they say. During the summer season you can go almost anywhere by boat. Nearly all the timber is floated down the streams and lakes to the coast cities where it is sawed into lumber or loaded uncut on ships. When the water freezes over in winter, the lakes and rivers make fine passageways for sleighs and sleds, which are as common there as wagons are in America.

"Though Finland lies in about the same latitude as the Seward Peninsula in your Alaska," said Judge Ilves, "and reaches into the Arctic Circle, the cold there in winter isn't as severe or troublesome as you might imagine. In Central Finland we have about the same winter climate as you have in Minnesota. By using ice breakers, we keep one of our ports open to sea traffic throughout the winter, when most our activities go on just as regularly as in summer. Of course in the far north of Finland it becomes exceedingly cold. The population there is very sparse. Lapland has only about 1,500 families."

The city of Helsingfors, the capital of Finland, with a population of 200,000 is one of the most modern of European cities, as its big growth dates back only about 100 years. The Finnish University, located there, ranks very high as an institution of learning. Helsingfors is the industrial metropolis of the country.

The Socialist is the strongest single political party in Finland. It doesn't control as there are many parties. The strength of Socialism is said by some to be a reaction from Russian control and association. Some of the Czars were liberal in their attitude toward Finland, allowing the people there full self-government under their old constitution. Others went to the opposite extreme of severity and repression.

In 1906 the Finns attained autonomy and began a series of domestic reforms that attracted the attention of political students the world over. Manhood and woman suffrage were adopted. The four-section parliament was reduced to a one-body diet, to which women were admitted and wherein they have since been prominent figures.

But their Russian overlords again became reactionary and re-applied old measures of repression.

The Finns took advantage of the revolution in Russia to assert their full independence. But before